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ABSTRACT

Perspectives on the context and results of the investigation conducted by the National Commission on Excellence in Education are presented. It is noted that the Commission's analysis sought to determine the extent to which colleges fail to set and maintain high standards, and the extent to which they fail to make their measures and benchmarks of performance clear. It is suggested that six key standards for higher education pertain to: the use and allocation of time for academic learning, the content in the disciplines, the level of academic performance expected of students, preparation of teachers, interinstitutional cooperation, and institutional behavior that is subject to ethical and value judgment. It is claimed that higher education institutions are not maintaining the standards of time, content, expectations, cooperation, and ethical behavior commensurate with their responsibilities. Some of the study areas and findings of the Commission are described, and 12 factors that might account for the evidence are cited. These include the following: the budgets of most colleges are driven by enrollments, resulting in the dilution of both admission and graduation requirements; there has been an excess of vocational and preprofessional curricula of very narrow scope; and most undergraduate curricula are not coherent courses of study. (SW)

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Getting Up Off the Floor: Standards and Realities in Higher Education

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Clifford Adelman

National Institute of Education*

It's good once again to be among my AAHE friends, and I only hope that we will still be friends at the end of this session. Our time this afternoon felicitously forces me to be about as subtle as an automobile wreck.

For we come bearing unsettling gifts—the findings and unanswered questions of the National Commission on Excellence in Education as they bear on postsecondary education in America. At the same time, and by a pleasant paradox, our unsettling gifts have suggested a great potential for national leadership in this organization. While the convening and dissemination authorities of AAHE have always been its most noted strengths, I am going to challenge you to something else at the conclusion of these unsettling minutes.

*This paper is presented by the author in his individual capacity as an Associate at the National Institute of Education. It should not be taken to reflect the judgements or opinions of the National Institute of Education, the National Commission on Excellence in Education or any of the Commissioners, or the U.S. Department of Education.

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For the past 18 months, I have been on partial detail from NIE to assist the Commission. With no false serving for this occasion, this detail has been an incredibly enriching and rewarding experience, one in which I have learned more about the nature of schooling in America (and elsewhere) than I had in the past 18 years. That could be a dubious tribute to my own ignorance, but I also think it is a tribute to Ted Bell's challenge to the Commission, which was truly mind-boggling in its scope--nothing short of a comprehensive assessment of teaching and learning in the nation's schools and colleges, with international comparisons and historical dimensions, with sensitivity to both transitions between levels of education and barriers to improvement and with reference to notable programs and promising approaches to many of our problems in education. Given the time frame, such an agenda would shake the collective will of any similarly assembled group.

Since November, the Commissioners have been undergoing the agony of writing their Final Report, while we on the staff have been engaged in the lesser agony of cleaning up the shop (which has turned out to be a much larger task than we had imagined) and, of course, in speculating on the kind of Final Report we would write if it were ours to write--which it is not--which is as it should be.

But I have the privilege of appearing today to report out some of what we learned that bears on the agenda of higher education, and more importantly, to offer at least one analytic framework by which that learning can be shaped.

In its inquiry, the Commission came to understand American education as a continuum that extends far beyond the formal system of schools and colleges. But it realized that within the formal system, there are six (6) key standards that are set principally by institutions of higher education:

(1) Standards for the use and allocation of time for academic learning. We differ with earlier assessments of the major variables affecting learning in the importance we place on time, particularly when we think of time in those two dimensions--time allocated and time used;

(2) Standards of content in the disciplines and the inter-disciplines; indeed, standards of content irrespective of disciplines;

(3) Standards for the level of academic performance expected of students--which, as we will see in a moment, are not actuarial or arbitrary standards;

(4) Standards for the preparation of teachers at all levels of education and standards for the treatment of teachers as professionals;

(5) Standards of cooperation with schools, industry, government and other institutions for the improvement of education and the advancement of knowledge;

(6) Standards for the behavior of institutions that is subject to ethical and value judgment.

Now, let's get our terms clear. Our first distinction is between "requirements" and "standards," a simple but extraordinarily important distinction given the cacophony that pervades contemporary discussions of American education. "Requirements" refers strictly to time-on-subject-matter and the presentation of credentials. When we say that a student must take "4 years of English" in high school or "36 credits of Liberal Arts courses" in college, we are talking about requirements, not standards. When we say that a student must present a high school diploma to qualify for college admissions, or that a student must take a placement examination in English composition before moving from the sophomore to the junior year of college, we are also talking about requirements.

"Standards," on the other hand, is a buzz-word, and we want to get rid of the buzz in favor of something analogous to a major seventh chord. The major seventh, as you know, is a leading tone--it establishes expectations. And standards are a form of expectations that refer to performance. We use measures to determine whether expectations are being met. And we set benchmarks along those measures to indicate the level of performance we expect on the measure.

It is obvious that some measures of performance are easier to establish than others; and some benchmarks are easier to set than others. It is difficult, for example, to measure cooperation among institutions; and some would argue that the measurement of ethical behavior of institutions is a moot question because, they hold, individuals behave, institutions do not. That is a very Socratic moral position; Aristotle

would disagree. This is a fire-and-ice argument, and is best not rehearsed this afternoon, for an afternoon could not contain it. So I will arbitrarily rule for Aristotle, and hold with those who think that ice will suffice.

The initial point of analysis, though, is that to the extent to which colleges, community colleges and universities fail to set and maintain high standards in each of these categories, to the extent to which they fail to make their measures and benchmarks of performance clear to all of us, the entire educational system suffers.

The voluminous evidence gathered by the Commission suggests very strongly to me (and I do not pretend to speak for the Commissioners, individually or collectively) that the current report card on higher education in America is, at best, mixed, and that too many of our 3300 institutions of higher education are not maintaining the standards of time, content, expectations, cooperation, and ethical behavior commensurate with their responsibilities.

The positive aspects of the report card should be cited, even to a group such as this--which is well-versed in them. When the Commission looked back across the past quarter century in American education there was no question that, of all our formal educational institutions, postsecondary institutions had undergone the greatest transformation, and, as a whole, had adapted well to both growth and an increasingly diverse constituency. But it is particularly important not to lose the lessons and sensitivities of that transformation because the future of

higher education will be driven even more by the demography of those new constituencies. And if the higher education we offer to women, to adults, to minorities, and to the geographically isolated falls short of their expectations and does not improve their capacity to perform, then access will have been an absolute sham!

"Sham" is a very strong word; and yet some of our findings suggest that the word can be applied--if selectively--to the current situation. For example, over the past decade, colleges and community colleges developed remedial and supportive service programs for underprepared students that proved very successful in rectifying--and in a remarkably short time--some of the basic deficiencies in students' previous schooling. But it was very unclear from the evidence we examined whether colleges persisted in moving these students beyond the old basics or beyond the most elementary study skills. It appeared as if many of our colleges said, in effect, "Well, now that you have passed Study Skills 101, Remedial Math, Remedial English, and attended our orientation workshops for a semester, you're just fine, and we'll see you next in Advanced Inorganic Chemistry." Failure to persist in the real mission of equity, however, failure to follow through, is to generate the conditions of a shipwreck that underprepared students will not survive.

Likewise, what we found particularly fascinating in examining selected innovative programs in postsecondary science and mathematics education, for example, was the emphasis on process rather than content.

Thus, college students may simply be learning outmoded material in more efficient ways. That is a very unhappy paradox that indicates that the standards of content may have been neglected.

The bottom line of assessing the effectiveness of any educational institution lies in the achievement and performance of students. The Commission and its staff found it odd--to say the least--that large scale research on growth and change in college students has focused on every conceivable topic other than their academic learning, and that the nation has never undertaken a comprehensive pulse reading of college student learning analogous to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). If measurements of educational progress come to a screeching halt when people reach the age of 17, we give the false impression--incommensurate with the goals of a learning society--that education and learning stop at that age as well.

Despite the absence of a comprehensive measure, the independent evidence of scores on standardized tests taken by college graduates indicates declines in achievement greater than those for high school graduates!!

Why haven't we noticed this very disturbing trend? Or, better still, why haven't we bothered to notice it? The test data is all there; and while I am sure that the "test lawyers" (which is my catch-phrase for psychometricians who qualify test results to such an extent that it is impossible to make any definitive statement about them) would offer their usual reams of footnotes to every score, I'm afraid that the

evidence of common sense empiricism is fairly strong. Since 1965, for example:

- o There has been a 16% decline in scores on the Verbal section of the Graduate Record Examination, compared to a 14% decline on the SAT/Verbal tests;
- o Scores on the Graduate Record achievement tests in such subjects as English and history have declined approximately 15% while scores in comparable fields on the College Board achievement tests for high school seniors have remained relatively stable;
- o Performance on the Graduate Management Admissions Test (which picks up that huge increase in undergraduate business administration majors) has fallen 6%.

Now this is admittedly selective data (the LSAT scores, for example, have gone up), and one is always wary of presenting the judgments of test data in such a raw form. But other evidence presented to the Commission corroborated the trends. Most significantly in terms of the performance of community college and college graduates in work-life was the testimony we received from large employers concerning the necessity for retraining college graduates in subjects ranging from foreign languages to finance, from matrix algebra to communications skills of all kinds. The fact that employers are compelled to retrain--and for reasons other than orientation to organizational norms-- indicates that the college degree is no longer a reliable indicator of competence.

Again, why have we not remarked on that, or on the unnecessary redundancies in the continuum of education that result? Because, I think, higher education tends to take a very smug "I'm all right Jack" attitude. It is always someone else who is at fault; and the recriminations that colleges heap upon primary and secondary schools are absolutely scandalous in that regard. The Commission held a luncheon-discussion with 27 presidents from the Chicago area last June, and to listen to them, you would think that the colleges occupied sacred ground in education and that the schools were wholly profane territory. And when we asked the Committee on College and University Teaching, Research, and Publication of AAUP to respond to five questions concerning the improvement of college teaching and relationships between colleges and high schools, we received, in one answer, the blithe comment that schools are "a foreign country." It's no wonder that schools are blamed for anything that may be wrong in the house of higher education.

But in the course of our work, we found very few two of four year colleges that required a student to demonstrate true proficiency in anything as a condition of receiving a degree, fewer still that set clear learning objectives and unambiguous standards for academic performance in undergraduate programs, and only a handful that even bothered to measure the value their programs added to student capacities and knowledge between entrance and graduation.

In addition, when we examined over 200 profiles of supposedly notable programs and promising approaches in higher education, it appeared that

only a third of those who wrote them knew what questions to ask about assessing the success of their own programs.

Looking across all our evidence, though--which is a lot broader than what I have cited--we had to ask what accounted for the mixed report card. In brief, I think, the following "dirty dozen" factors can be cited, some of which are very familiar to you, some of which are not.

(1) The budgets of most colleges are driven by enrollments; and both admissions and graduation requirements (not standards) have been diluted to prop up enrollments. The effects on the course-taking behaviors of high school students are staggering, and we have a rather interesting study of 17 years of high school transcript data to back that contention. But notice: when colleges recently decided to show somebody that they meant business, what did we do vis-a-vis admissions? In the main, our first instinct was to jiggle with admissions standards, not requirements. Move the SAT cut-off score from 460 to 480. Move the minimum acceptable high school class rank from the 65th percentile to the 70th percentile. Such arbitrary actuarial responses do nothing for the quality of education in the system.

(2) Given the search for enrollments and the time-based nature of college degrees, the credit system has been abused in many colleges and universities. When a state university grants as much credit for a course in "Hi-Fi Systems for the Music Lover" as it does for College Algebra or Communication Theory; when another offers more credit for a course in "Basic Nature Photography" than it does for courses in Neuropsychology

or American Diplomatic History, then standards for the allocation of time for academic learning have been lowered. As long as the college credit system equates allocated time with learning and bases its values on class contact hours, we will have continued problems with standards, because our credit system states our values, and students--both current and prospective--are very sensitive to the messages we unwittingly put forward.

(3) To attract students with mistaken notions of the relationship between education and vocation, colleges, community colleges and universities have tolerated an excess of vocational and pre-professional curricula of very narrow scope, and have allowed students too much latitude to focus only their major and specialized allied courses. Robert Blackburn's study of college student transcripts in the early 1970s more than adequately demonstrated the disparity between the catalogue curriculum and the curriculum experienced by students in this regard. And when the community college system of one state offers no less than 197 occupational degree programs ranging from "Horseshoing" to "Operating Room Technician," it becomes clear that higher education has lost control over the standards of content that lie behind degrees.

(4) Thus, too, and despite recent movements toward reform, most undergraduate curricula remain fragmented, resembling Chinese menus more than coherent courses of study.

(5) A considerable amount of unnecessary repetition between high school and college curricula remains, i.e. many community colleges and colleges are not using the time allocated for academic learning efficiently.

(6) Indeed, as Anne Campbell pointed out this afternoon, most entering college freshmen have little idea of what the transition from secondary to postsecondary education means, and of what is expected of them as academic workers--if you will--and young adults. With few--but notable--exceptions, [illegible]ns of higher education have failed to address this critical [illegible]ives of students.

(7) The quality of facilities--laboratories, equipment, libraries--at many colleges has deteriorated to the point at which those tools of learning cannot support the search for excellence. This, of course, is a product of administrative decisions in a time of shrinking resources generally. When administrators have to identify organizational "slack" that can be reined in as the budget squeeze increases, they turn first, of course, to anything but human resources.

(8) There are insufficient incentives and rewards for college faculty to either (a) improve the quality or undergraduate teaching or (b) engage in sustained dialogue with and outreach to secondary schools and other educational institutions. The standards of cooperation among institutions engaged in a common enterprise thus cannot be maintained. Perhaps I am overly cynical, but it strikes me that public awards for excellence in teaching or community service are, in many of our

colleges, hollow rituals that deflect tensions that might otherwise arise in the tenure and promotion process.

(9) Most four year college faculty receive no training whatsoever as teachers, and seem to pick up whatever they know about student development, curriculum or assessment by osmosis during their early years of teaching. There is no quality control in that. Our student body is far more diverse, and colleges as organizations are far more complex than they were a scant twenty years ago, yet we are preparing our future faculty only as disciplinary experts and in ways that basically have not changed in a century. This is a complex subject, but it appears that the tensions between the disciplinary identification and institutional responsibilities of faculty have to be addressed better than we have in order to maintain standards for the treatment of faculty as professionals working in an organizational context.

(10) The percentage of college students intending to continue to graduate school in the disciplines and to pursue careers in college teaching has declined from 3.4% in 1966 to 0.2% in 1981--a frightening statistic for the future of higher education. Today's high tenure ratios have discourage tomorrow's potential college professors. When you put that statistic together with the falling scores on the GRE achievement tests in history, English, psychology, political science, etc. the implications are even more frightening. Just at the moment a generation of faculty retire about 10 years from now, we will have nothing to replace them.

(11) The values of our institutions of higher learning have, in many cases, been corrupted. We can be entrepreneurial and ethical at the same time. Too often we are not. I am not going to catalogue our sins, nor cite the more flagrant examples of abuses in the recruitment of students or the offering of dubious credit for courses of even more dubious quality to both traditional and non-traditional learners--principally at non-traditional sites. I also think I can refer the memories of this audience to the eloquent presentation last year by Lee Kneflekamp and others on the ways colleges treat cheating--and other forms of dishonesty--by all members of their communities. I would finally refer you, as a shorthand--not a cop-out--to an article that appeared in Sports Illustrated in May of 1980 entitled "The Shame of College Athletics." It is an article that bears rereading whenever we think we stand on sacred ground.

(12) Finally--and it brings a great deal of the previous explanations together--accreditation standards for postsecondary institutions are based primarily on proxy measures, not on actual student learning or on any of the other standards I cited at the outset. What this indicates to me is a failure to maintain our own stated values.

Now that that is a fairly grim assessment for this otherwise happy gathering of friends. As I do not take any particular pleasure in playing the roles of either Cassandra or Jeremiah, and as I've probably used up whatever good will I had when I started, I'm going to try to recoup my losses.

---which is to say that I had lived very close to all this material for the past 18 months, had 10 years in the field raging at the dying of the light coming into this experience, and could be grossly misreading it. As I understand what is winding up in the Final Report of the Commission, you aren't going to read too much about this, nor are you going to find too much about higher education. So in light of my own malfeasances, in light of the incredibly rich body of material on higher education that the Commission has assembled, and in light of the need for us all to understand it, reach some conclusions and offer some recommendations directly at changing truly alterable conditions, I have a challenge to offer my good friends at AAHE.

Most of our material is currently in the public domain. What isn't there now will shortly be accessible. I challenge AAHE to assemble a representative committee of its membership to take that material into its hands, to examine and reanalyze it, to formulate very bold, concrete and practical recommendations that do not duck the major issues, and to return to this body at the 1984 Annual Conference with a report on Excellence in American Higher Education for your consideration and adoption, a report that is worthy of the trust we all have placed in AAHE over the years as our convening authority, a report that is sensitive to the diversity of institutions and missions that inhabit our house, and a report that is above all respectful and caring of the common ground we hold with students, among whom we must count ourselves.